

# **Huey Long**

**His Life in Photos,  
Drawings, and Cartoons**



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His Life in Photos,  
Drawings, and Cartoons

By Garry Boulard



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# Introduction

Past forests baked by a relentless summer sun; past dusty, desperate cotton patches; past lonesome river towns; past everything that was broken and crippled, the seventeen-year-old boy went, surveying through the smudged windows of a train thick with farmers, fumes, and men who just moved about from one town to the next, the state called Louisiana.

“My territory covered several states in the South,” Huey P. Long later recalled of his route as a traveling salesman. With his unruly auburn hair stuffed beneath a sweaty straw hat, Huey loved life on the road. Beefsteak in downtown diners, hard beds in strange hotels, and rock candy all done up in brightly colored paper bags—this was a far cry from the rural Winn Parish of his youth that he had been so desperate to escape.

“According to the lights and standards of my associates,” Huey later boasted, “I had arrived.”<sup>1</sup>

Born in 1893, Huey Long was a teacher’s worst nightmare, constantly interrupting, questioning, demanding attention. But his precociousness soon enough paid off: at the age of nineteen he entered Tulane University, where he would exhaust himself sixteen hours a day, speeding through a three-year program in law in twenty-four months.

A practicing attorney at twenty-one, Huey won election to

the state railroad commission just four years later, the same year he wrote a letter to a New Orleans paper giving the first publicly documented evidence of his budding populism. “Sixty-five or 70 percent of the entire wealth of the United States is owned by about 2 percent of the people,” he protested.<sup>2</sup>

Rhetoric married reality whenever Huey looked around. People who worked in Louisiana—farmers, unskilled common laborers, and others—“led lives of varying degrees of misery,” said journalist Hamilton Basso, who covered the same depleted territory as Huey did during his ascendancy.<sup>3</sup>

“They lived in mud-plastered shacks which sometimes served as both home and stable,” Basso continued. “Their women were broken at thirty, and to the horror of more than one traveler, their children often ate clay.”<sup>4</sup>

Huey, angry, made a prediction: someday something would happen, perhaps a revolution, some sort of violent uprising ordered to even things out.

But no revolution, even with wooden ballot boxes as its front line, could succeed or much less endure unless it had a leader.

In his midtwenties, Huey had determined his future. “I’ll tell you how I’m going to win,” he told a friend when he announced his candidacy for governor in 1924. He was thirty years old. “I’m going to go into every parish and cuss out the boss—that gives me 40 percent of the votes to begin with, and I’ll hoss trade ’em out of the in-betweens.”<sup>5</sup>

He would, he predicted, serve as Louisiana’s youngest governor, then run for a seat in the U.S. Senate, and after winning that—on to the White House!

“It almost gave you the chills to hear him talk about it,” recalled Rose McConnell, a young dark-haired stenographer from Shreveport whom Huey married in 1913. “He was measuring it all.”<sup>6</sup>

He began the race as a decided long shot, but not without certain valuable assets. His work on the railroad commission,



which was characterized by a series of angry encounters with the Standard Oil company and several utility companies, had given him valuable statewide publicity in the early 1920s and endeared him to thousands.

No established political unit would have him. "I had neither newspaper nor organized political support," Huey admitted. Yet somehow he managed a strong third-place showing, making a subsequent—and this time triumphant—run for the statehouse in 1928 inevitable.<sup>7</sup>

Huey was thirty-four years old when he at long last entered the statehouse, and he was full of utopian visions. "Unemployment in Louisiana will be virtually eradicated," he passionately told a group of men who had opposed him and were bored by his dreams, men who, in fact, were only now listening to him because he was the governor-elect. He promised good things for all upon taking office, even for his former foes, especially if they would support him. "Commerce will revive. Peace and prosperity will be here."<sup>8</sup>

Once sworn into office, Huey quickly, even alarmingly, ushered in an era of upheaval. He expanded the state Charity Hospital system and the Baton Rouge campus of Louisiana State University (he gave the school so much money, in fact, that he soon regarded it as his personal province). He distributed thousands of textbooks to poor schoolchildren and launched the beginning of a sweeping overhaul of the state's eighteenth-century physical infrastructure, constructing more than three thousand miles of new roads and bridges in a short four-year period.

He was in a hurry. Even as Louisiana was suddenly outpacing all of its sister states in the South in public works and building, it did not move, for Huey, fast enough.

He pushed, commanded, cajoled, and threatened lawmakers, judges, reporters, and powerful businessmen. Inevitably, in a statehouse long used to the soft murmuring of Southern aristocrats, he made enemies. In less than one year, there would be a powerful but ultimately unsuccessful campaign to

impeach and remove Huey from office by an opposition that had come to loathe him with alarming ferocity.

Then, in 1930, Huey suddenly announced he was a candidate for the U.S. Senate and won another bitter contest, this time against an aging incumbent who never knew what hit him. But Huey refused to move to Washington until January of 1932, when his chosen successor, Oscar ("O. K.") Allen, was elected governor, thus guaranteeing Huey's continued control of the state.

For years the country had been reading about Huey Long and Louisiana, but now, in Washington, the nation's top reporters got to see him for the first time in the flesh. Their response was nearly hysterical. The *New York Times* called him the "Terror of the Bayous." *Time* magazine splashed his face on its cover. James Thurber, H. L. Mencken, and H. G. Wells devoted columns to him.<sup>9</sup>

Huey's Senate colleagues would prove measurably less ecstatic. Alben Barkley of Kentucky, possessor of a sage wit and loyal Franklin Roosevelt man, admitted Huey was one of the most intelligent men to have gained admission to the Senate, but surely he was among the most troublesome too. Harry Truman, who would not join Barkley and Long until 1934, was instantly dismissive. "He was nothing but a damn demagogue," Truman later judged.<sup>10</sup>

A young, lanky congressional staffer disagreed with his elders. Lyndon Johnson quickly became so enamored of Huey, particularly of his long-winded, grand speeches, which were characterized by flailing arms and fist-smashing gestures, that he bribed a Senate doorkeeper to let him know whenever Huey was about to speak.

As in Baton Rouge, Huey quickly became disillusioned with the slow way public officials got things done, if, indeed, they did anything at all. The country was in the midst of the Great Depression; people were hungry, jobless, and for the first time in American history thinking that the American way no longer worked. Did anyone in Washington care?

“Men,” Huey bellowed to his senatorial colleagues one late night, “it will not be long until there will be a mob assembling here to hang senators from the rafters of the Senate.”<sup>11</sup>

How well this observation went over with those senators can only be imagined, but Huey could not resist adding: “And I have to determine whether I will stay and be hung with you or go out and lead the mob.”<sup>12</sup>

Although he initially supported Pres. Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal series of economic reforms, Huey soon complained about the pace of the nation’s recovery. By early 1934, during a nationwide radio address, he broke with Roosevelt, saying that the New Deal did not go far enough and adding that only a wholesale redistribution of the nation’s wealth could save the country.

“The Scripture says, ladies and gentlemen, that no country can survive, or for a country to survive, it is necessary that we keep the wealth scattered among the people,” Huey remarked.<sup>13</sup>

He announced the formation of the Share Our Wealth movement, which demanded that Washington heavily tax all incomes starting at \$1 million. Revenues from such taxes, he added, would then be redistributed among the nation’s poor.

Economists could not believe their ears. The idea made no practical sense, they said, even if within the nation’s borders there were enough millionaires to pay for everyone else. But in the fifth year of the nation’s worst economic crisis, Huey’s proposal proved undeniably popular. By early 1935 there were more than twenty-seven thousand SOW clubs across the country, with more than 8 million members.

In the spring of that same year, Huey hired a team of secretaries for his busy Washington office to handle the mail generated by the SOW movement. Weekly, he received more than sixty thousand letters, the vast majority from people who not only sent him money but urged him to run for president.

Far more troubling, from FDR's vantage point, were the results of a private poll commissioned by the Democratic National Committee, which showed that if Huey decided to run as an independent in 1936 he could easily draw up to 4 million votes, more than enough to win against the president and the opposition Republicans.

He was playing on a large stage and attracting followers who would die for him as well as enemies who dreamed of seeing him dead. "If there ever was a time to kill Huey Long, the time is *now*," a Tulane graduate wrote to New Orleans mayor T. Semmes Walmsley, who, by 1935, was Huey's most prominent foe in Louisiana.<sup>14</sup>

Taking note of the increasing power Huey had won for himself in Louisiana—a compliant legislature had by now given him virtually the full run of the state—many were alarmed. The simple fact that a group of tough armed guards circled Huey during his every public appearance, sometimes beating those they deemed a threat, only added to growing concerns about his future in a democratic republic.

"This country," Hugh Johnson, a top New Dealer who had come to despise Huey, remarked, "was never under a greater menace."<sup>15</sup>

Raymond Swing, in 1935 the nation's most popular radio commentator, traveled to Baton Rouge, studied Huey's one-man rule up close, and concluded that he was the one man in the country "ruthless, ambitious, and indeed plausible enough to Hitlerize America."<sup>16</sup>

Yet, Huey's followers multiplied. More than ten thousand people turned out to hear him speak in Georgia in the spring of 1935. After a similar visit to South Carolina, some forty thousand enthusiasts pledged to join the national SOW movement.

Where would it all lead? In the late spring of that year, Huey provided a hint. He was working on a book, he announced. Its title: *My First Days in the White House*.

The dream suggested by the title spurred Huey to a return visit to Louisiana in early September of 1935 so he could personally oversee the passage of yet a new batch of laws expanding his kingdom.

Slapping friendly lawmakers on the back during a late-night session in the state capitol, Huey exited the House chamber by way of a side hallway on his way to an interview with a reporter. Suddenly a series of gunshots rang out.

Four days later Huey's funeral attracted more than two hundred fifty thousand people and was front-page news around the globe.

As Huey's body was lowered into a steel-reinforced concrete grave in the middle of the capitol's front flower garden, the Reverend Gerald L. K. Smith intoned: "This place marks not the resting place of Huey . . . his spirit shall never rest as long as hungry bodies cry for food, as long as human frames stand naked, as long as homeless wretches haunt this land of plenty."<sup>17</sup>

In the decades to come, Huey's populism would prove remarkably durable. His brother, Earl, would serve as governor of Louisiana three times, beginning in 1939 and ending in 1960, while the controversial Cajun Edwin Edwards—who never denied that he regarded himself as Huey's political descendent—extended Huey's philosophy to a new generation that lasted until the mid-1990s.

The subject of more than two dozen books and a handful of feature films, Huey Long, observed historian Robert S. McElvaine, "was a man who evoked extreme emotions of love or hate," adding that even by the 1990s "neutrality on the subject of Huey Long remains elusive."<sup>18</sup>

The only thing certain is that Huey—like perhaps only a few others such as Jefferson Davis and Martin Luther King, Jr.—has emerged as one of the South's grandest legends, a figure certain to inspire electric debate for decades to come.